

YOSEMITE VALLEY FIXED-OBJECT JUMPING

*A dangerous, sometimes deadly, new
pastime exists in a vague region between
sport and stunt*



YOSEMITE VALLEY, IN California's Yosemite National Park, is surrounded by huge gray granite cliffs, some smooth and sheer, some topped with domes or spires. El Capitan, which rises about 3,000 feet above the valley floor, is the most famous of the cliffs. Half Dome, about 1,800 feet high, dominates the upper end of the valley. The cliffs have a particular kind of allure. The first white men to ascend the mountains around Yosemite often compared them to the Swiss Alps; one mountaineer remarked in 1863 that Yosemite lacked the "picturesque beauty" of the Alps but possessed a desolation and starkness that imparted a "sublime grandeur." John Muir, the nineteenth-century naturalist and conservationist, did some climbing among the rugged walls, and after one adventure he wrote, "We little know until tried how much of the uncontrollable there is in us, urging us across glaciers and torrents, and up dangerous heights, let judgment forbid as it may."

Last August, a thirty-five-year-old man named Jim Tyler was killed on Half Dome, having given in to one of his own uncontrollable urges. Tyler was not climbing the cliff, however; he was par-

achuting from its summit. In fact, he was trying to become the first person to jump consecutively from three cliffs in the park. For Tyler the goal wasn't unusual. Tyler was "a real pioneer," according to one of his friends. "He had to be first, but at times he could be hasty and impatient." He was an experienced parachutist who had done some stunt work—his greatest feat being a chuteless dive from an airplane, in which he had to link up with another sky-diver's canopy in midair. In Yosemite last summer, he successfully jumped from El Capitan and another cliff named Glacier Point. He had two companions with him for the Half Dome jump, which he made in the late evening of August 4. As usual, Tyler went first. During his free fall—he waited for three seconds before deploying his parachute—he reached a speed of about 100 miles an hour. Using his body as an airfoil, he was supposed to glide away from the cliff. He didn't glide far enough. When his chute opened, its lines were twisted, and Tyler was spun around into Half Dome's granite face. His canopy snagged on the cliff and collapsed.

What Tyler was doing, strictly speaking, is called fixed-object jumping. It's one of those activities that exist somewhere in a vague region between stunt and sport, less conspicuous than jumping over parked cars with a motorcycle but not considered legitimate in the way that mountain climbing is. It is certainly dangerous; in fact, the premise of fixed-object jumping is risk. Its participants parachute from bridges, cliffs, skyscrapers, and other platforms too low to allow adjustments for equipment failure or errors of judgment. They must also some-

how avoid the objects they've jumped from. Obviously, the people who do this are looking for experience of an unusual sort; they say the effect is like no other, a thrill so intense that even ordinary sky-diving becomes mundane in comparison. "It's just the best feeling I've ever had," one fixed-object jumper told me recently. "It's frightening, yes, but the moment you jump there is a quietness and peace and control. You end up with a feeling of clarity and power. After I did it, it's the only thing I ever really wanted to do again."

Unlike sky-diving or mountain climbing, however, what fixed-object jumpers do is almost always illegal. When they do it, they risk being arrested. And the consequences of that fear of arrest can mean trouble. It meant trouble in Yosemite last August, when Jim Tyler died, and afterward, when authorities found out what happened.

As near as anyone can determine, what happened is this: After Tyler jumped from the cliff, his two companions, Howard Dunklin and Pat Tierney, did the same, both landing safely. Meanwhile, a team of mountain climbers nearby notified some rangers that they thought they had witnessed a parachuting accident. The rangers went to the base of Half Dome and found Dunklin and Tierney hiking away. According to Dick Martin, a Yosemite Valley district ranger, the two men denied having jumped and refused to say whether an accident had occurred. "After some time," says Martin, "the rangers asked them whether they thought it would be a good idea to launch a rescue effort. They said yes, they thought it would be a good idea." In other words, Dunklin and Tierney had apparently tried to sneak away from Half Dome to avoid arrest, even though they knew their friend had been hurt.

In the dark, the rangers needed several hours to find Tyler. He was given cardiopulmonary resuscitation, although Dick Martin says that he may already have been dead. But for the rangers, the question of when Tyler died was irrelevant. The accident came only weeks after another jumper, Larry Wolfe, was seriously injured diving from Half Dome. According to an unofficial count, those two were the only casualties after twenty parachute jumps from the cliff. But many other jumps have been made in Yosemite, including at least 550 from El Capitan. In all, nine jumping-related

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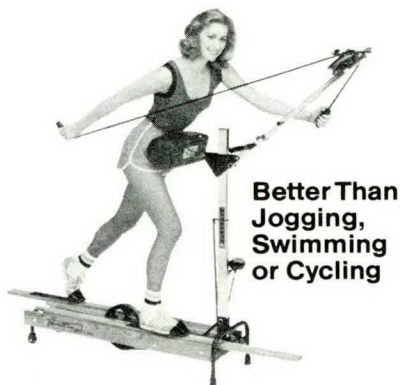
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injuries have occurred in the Park; Tyler's was the first that resulted in death. Rangers describe the covert jumping as a dangerous cat-and-mouse game, and after last August they were clearly tired of playing along. "There were so many injuries that it seemed like an open invitation for unqualified people to jump," says Dick Martin. "This time the results were tragic."

"From now on we're throwing the book at them," Bill Wendt, the chief ranger of Yosemite, said after the accident. "This is going to stop." Howard Dunklin and Pat Tierney eventually pleaded guilty to misdemeanor charges of unlawful flight (a violation of federal park regulations), were fined \$500, and were placed on six months' probation.

Many at Yosemite doubt, however, that severe punishment will be enough to stop fixed-object jumping. The jumpers have their own ideas about the Jim Tyler incident and why it happened. Carl Boenish, a well-known sky-diver who has made several jumps in Yosemite, told me recently that the law was partly to blame for what happened to Tyler. "He shouldn't have been jumping in the evening," Boenish said. "The air is more turbulent then, and more dangerous. But he didn't want to be seen. We're always taking chances that we shouldn't, because of the law. How can the rangers expect us to cooperate when they want to put us in jail?" Another climber I spoke with put it more bluntly: "I have a right to be in the Park," he said. "And I have a right to die there."

AFTER JIM TYLER died, several newspaper reporters began to question whether fixed-object jumpers had gone too far in pursuit of their right to die. But going far is part of the point of fixed-object jumping, and drawing a line between far and too far is hard to do. What is considered difficult or dangerous one day becomes routine later on. Sky-diving, for instance, evolved from a military skill to an accepted sport in the early 1960s. It has since been pushed in new directions. At first, accuracy was the goal of sky-divers; they wanted to land on targets. In the 1970s, more sophisticated equipment led to tougher challenges, such as "building" formations of sky-divers in midair, an activity known technically as "relative work."

Carl Boenish says that jumping from buildings and cliffs is just another level of sophistication—part of the natural

evolution of sky-diving. Boenish is a tall man with thick brown hair, and looks younger than his age, which is forty-one. He lives in Hawthorne, California, with his wife, Jean, also a sky-diver, and works out of a studio in his home as a sky-diving photographer. He is a soft-spoken, pleasant man, and is considered the unofficial historian of fixed-object jumping. When I met him, I asked why he thought the sport got started. "After you make about 500 jumps," he said, "you start to get jaded. You start looking for new challenges." Fixed-object jumping began getting popular in the late 1970s. By 1978, sky-divers had leaped from El Capitan, the Dolomite Alps in Italy, the World Trade Center, in New York City, and Seattle's Space Needle. In 1979, Boenish and three other sky-divers took a new tack by jumping from Colorado's 1,053-foot Royal Gorge Bridge. But the jumpers seemed to keep coming back to Yosemite.

Boenish was the one who thought he could organize the activity into a real sport. He came up with the acronym BASE—for Building, Antenna Tower, Span (meaning bridges), and Earth (meaning cliffs). Under his system, anyone who jumps from each kind of platform qualifies for a BASE award, which is issued by the U.S. BASE Association, another invention of his. Boenish says that forty people have qualified for patches so far, and another 2,000 have made at least one qualifying jump.

To date, the lowest BASE jump probably belongs to Phil Smith—a 190-foot drop from the ceiling of Houston's Astrodome (a publicity stunt). "That's about as low as possible," says Phil Mayfield, another BASE jumper. "You might be able to jump from 150 feet. Certainly 100 is too low. Our knowledge is gained through trial and error. Unfortunately, someday someone is going to find out how low is too low." In the meantime, new forms of risk-taking evolve. A separate BASE patch is now given for making jumps at night. And, in 1980, a young man from Los Angeles named Randy Leavitt combined his skills as a rock-climber and a parachutist, scaling the face of El Capitan, and then turning around at the top and jumping back off. Two other people have done it since, and Leavitt has named his new sport "cliffing." "Compared to just parachuting from the top," he says, cliffing, which combines risk and aesthetics, "is a much purer experience."



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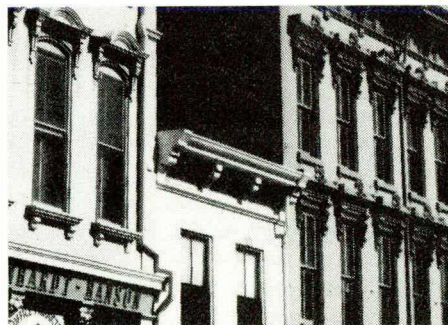
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Pure or not, it can still get you arrested. For BASE jumpers, staying out of jail is something of a preoccupation. Except for a few publicity stunts, arranged by radio stations and television shows such as *That's Incredible*, BASE jumpers have seldom been able legally to do what they want to do most. Jumps are almost always made in the early morning or in the late evening, when no one is around. "We're outlaws," Carl Boenish told me, "but that doesn't mean we're wrong. The law is wrong." Phil Mayfield passed along this advice to other BASE jumpers when I spoke with him: "Don't check in with local police to see if it's okay to jump. Just go ahead and do it."

THE CLIFFS OF Yosemite are where the problem has been most clearly defined. The National Park Service says that cliff-divers simply will not cooperate with authorities. "At issue is our ability to manage the safety of our parks," says Bill Wendt. Providing a measure of safety in places as wild as Yosemite is a growing problem for rangers. In 1980, more than 300 million visits were made to the national parks, nearly double the number made ten years ago. Not surprisingly, the number of accidents and deaths has gone up. In 1980, 209 deaths were recorded in national parks, up from 165 in 1970. Relatively few of these deaths resulted from high-risk sports such as rock climbing or parachuting (the leading cause of death in national parks is drowning), but rock-climbers and parachutists tend to get noticed. In the past few years, rangers have resorted to a tactical warfare of sorts to stop cliff-jumpers. They have dressed as backpackers to keep an eye on the trails leading to the tops of the cliffs, and they have staged surprise raids. Those arrested have had to submit to strip searches and have had to spend up to a week in the Park's jail awaiting arraignment. One jumper was charged with a felony offense—stealing state's evidence—when he tried to walk away with his own parachute after it had been seized by rangers.

The rangers did try to work out a compromise with jumpers, in the summer of 1981, by setting up a program for legal cliff-diving in the Park. The program was modeled after one already established for hang-gliders, people who jump from the cliffs wearing large, kite-like airfoils. The hang-gliders in Yosemite are strictly regulated as to when and

where they can jump; in five years no one has been killed or seriously injured.

The program for the cliff-jumpers didn't work as well. Nearly 400 jumps were made legally during the period, but almost as many illegal jumps occurred. "Many jumpers didn't cooperate at all," says Dick Martin, the ranger from Yosemite. After only one month, the United States Parachuting Association, which governs the sport of sky-diving, ruled that cliff-jumping was "a stunt activity," which could not be endorsed. (The USPA says that 2,000 feet is the lowest altitude at which a sky-diver should open his parachute; most cliff-divers in Yosemite open at about 1,200 feet.) After that decision, the Park rangers ended the program. Besides being too dangerous, they said, cliff-jumping was drawing crowds that were destroying the meadow below El Capitan. The rangers also complained that money being spent on occasional rescue attempts could better be used elsewhere in the Park budget.

Canceling the legal-jumping program put the rangers in the precarious position of judging the competing merits of various risk-takers. Rock-climbing is allowed in all the national parks. In Yosemite, no permit is required for climbers, and registration is voluntary. Consequently, rangers can't say how many climbers were in Yosemite last year; they do know, however, that eight people suffered climbing-related injuries. Most climbers agree that their sport is as dangerous as cliff-diving, if not more so. It is also destructive to the environment: Bill Wendt says that climbing equipment, such as pitons and bolts, has "literally rubbed the face off of El Capitan."

"The National Park Service position is completely arbitrary," says Robin Heid, a parachutist who was arrested four years ago after jumping off of El Capitan. Heid, who is twenty-nine years old, and a writer in Denver, is intensely committed to his jumping and to the idea of risk. Last summer he broke his back, a leg, and an ankle while parasailing (being pulled along wearing a parachute) behind a car. When I met him, in December, he was having the last pins removed from his ankle, and planning a jump from Denver's 700-foot United Bank Building. (He made the jump on New Year's Day.) Heid told me that the right to make fixed-object jumps is like the right of

self-expression. "Society is so structured and ordered," he told me, "that we need an outlet—to have challenges. But that is a frightening thought for authorities. Ultimately, what the rangers are trying to do is to stop not just BASE jumpers but rock-climbers, and other people who do things that differ from society's norms."

Bill Wendt, the chief ranger at Yosemite, is a skier and a fine mountaineer, a man who can appreciate challenges. A friend of Wendt's told me that he tends to see issues in black and white. He has certainly had a lot to say about fixed-object jumping, and not much of it has been good. But he can see some gray areas. After the legal jumping was canceled, Wendt told a reporter that the matter was part of a larger problem of aesthetics—a question of what should be allowed in the national parks. "Does the automobile belong in the park?" Wendt said. "The answer is obviously no, but we allow them. And what's the difference between watching a mountain climber, a hang-glider, or a sky-diver—especially if the observer is watching over the roof of a Winnebago? Some say it's beautiful to watch, others say no. It's all in the eye of the beholder."

FOR MOST OF us—for this beholder, at least—what fixed-object jumpers do is nearly incomprehensible. Parachutists have a term for those who never take up the sport—they call them "Whuffos," short for the question they are most often asked, which is, "Whuffo you jump out of airplanes?" When you risk your neck on purpose, no one can understand. Usually, you're better off not trying to explain.

Robin Heid touched on this issue in an article he wrote last year for the *Denver Post*, in a section the newspaper calls "Adventure." The story was about an incident that had occurred one morning in the Black Canyon of Gunnison National Monument, in Colorado. Heid was with a group of parachutists who continued to jump from the canyon's edge even though the second man off, Larry Jackson, had crashed and been hung up halfway down the cliff. "No one could tell if he was moving, and there was nothing we could do but fly by and see if a better determination could be made," wrote Heid. The jumpers didn't notify the rangers until they had finished jumping. A rescue team had to wait until the next morning to get to Jackson, who was

dead. I asked Robin Heid about the incident. "It's easy to misunderstand what happened," he said. "The Black Canyon is very remote. Larry couldn't have been rescued that night anyway. We'd done a lot of planning to get there. We weren't going to stop because Larry made a mistake."

No criminal charges were brought against any of the jumpers, but, like Jim Tyler's death, the incident in the Black Canyon caused some people to wonder whether the jumpers, exercising their rights, had lost sight of other responsibilities. One of those people is Will Oxx, Jr., a Naval Academy midshipman who has taken up cliffing; last summer he climbed Half Dome and parachuted off only a few days before Jim Tyler died. "Jim's death and the Black Canyon thing, they're both the same," Oxx told me. "I believe that jumpers have the right to break the law if they have to, because the law is wrong. But if I were with someone who got hurt, I'd feel I had to do whatever I could to help. Both accidents should have been reported sooner than they were. If you're more worried about getting arrested than anything else, you shouldn't be jumping." Randy Leavitt, the man who invented cliffing, told me that fixed-object jumpers need more time to develop a background of informal rules and traditions that might temper the passion behind their sport. "BASE jumpers aren't like rock-climbers," he said. "They aren't humble. It will take time for them, because they've got to create a respect for death." I think he meant respect for the presumed aesthetics of risk-taking. But BASE jumpers aren't always clear.

Carl Boenish predicts that BASE jumping will one day be a socially accepted sport. He points out that last October parachutists were allowed to jump from West Virginia's New River Gorge Bridge, which is 900 feet high, and that onlookers were delighted. Boenish talks about regulating his sport the way the United States Parachuting Association regulates sky-diving, and about safer BASE jumping. But, after talking with Robin Heid, I doubted that such a plan could be put into effect soon. "It's not what the sport is about," Heid told me. "The idea is not to have to obey a lot of rules. The idea is to have fun."

— David Schonauer

David Schonauer is senior editor of Outside magazine.

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